

Odd bedfellows: combining leadership development, self-managed teams and projects

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Good morning everyone and thank you for having me here today. My name is Flic French and I'm a librarian at the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland.

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal (nun-a-wall) people, and pay my respects to their elders' past, present and emerging. I also acknowledge the owners of the land on which I live and work in Brisbane, the Turrabul, Juggera and Quandamooka peoples.

Today I'm here to talk to you about leadership, professional development and change.

Those are three pretty big topics to fit into 20 minutes, especially this early in the morning, so I hope you're all ready for a bit of a whistle-stop tour. I'll start by giving you a bit of background to the University of Queensland Library, then I'm going to talk a bit about the difficulties of managing change in an organisation, before going on to discuss a professional development scheme started at UQ to try to address these difficulties, and some of the project outcomes of this scheme.

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The University of Queensland is a large group of 8 university with roughly 55 thousand students and 7 thousand full time equivalent staff spread over three major campuses and a number of other locations. To serve such a large community, the Library has to be pretty big in order to keep up. We have over 200 staff at various levels over 3 departments: Learning and Research Services who are generally the most client facing section as our Client Services Officers and Liaison Librarians sit there, along with our scholarly communications and research services who produce a frankly scary number of metrics reports and administer our institutional repository, UQ eSpace. The next section, Information Systems and Resource Services deal with everything from administering journal contracts and purchasing new resources to administering library management and reading list systems, providing document delivery services, creating memberships and undertaking user experience research. Library Technical Services, our dedicated IT support staff are also in this section, as our digitisation department. The final section is Library Corporate Services which incorporates property and facilities, marketing and communications, our copyright lawyer, staff development consultant and archives and special collections. We serve clients face to face at 10 branch libraries and administer lower usage collections in a dedicated purpose-built warehouse space. Our ten branch libraries incorporate general student libraries, a law library, hospital libraries and a special collections reading room. Yesterday we opened a large-scale refurbishment of two levels of student space at our Central Library to provide over 600 new student study spaces. I realise that's a lot of information, but I'm hoping that giving you an idea of complexity and size of the organisation will help with what follows.

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One of the things that is hardest to do in any organisation is to manage change. Change can be scary even when it's for excellent reasons and is going to make your life easier or better. This is as true of UQ as every other institution, and it's something that is a constant in libraries as we constantly evolve to meet changing information needs and delivery methods. That's why one of the compulsory modules as part of my librarianship qualification was on Organisational Change Management.

UQ Library has a great staff retention rate, which means we must be doing something right! But it also means that a lot of people who have been with the library for a long time have been through a lot of change, not all of which has been a positive experience for them. Sometimes this means that the prospect of more change can lead to malaise that we need to stop from spreading. In 2014, the library went through a major review which led to the creation of the structure I just outlined, and since then there have been a number of change projects including a review and restructure of the Fryer Library in 2017 and a whole library strategic refresh which is currently underway. We know that some people may be resistant to change, especially when change is seen as 'imposed' from the top down repeatedly and perhaps without good reason or consultation.

So at UQ, we've decided to use something that we're calling the Swiss Cheese approach to change – creating change makers at all levels of the organisation to help carry along the people who may be lactose intolerant. It's a way of getting in little pockets of positivity throughout your organisation and letting it spread outwards organically. It's great to institute change from the top of an organisation, but it's not always the most effective and efficient means to do so.

The Swiss cheese metaphor in this context wasn't my idea – that was my line-manager's manager's boss, Annette McNicol – but it is why I'm here today. Over the past year and a half, I have taken part in two projects that exemplify the swiss cheese approach which are part of a larger professional development scheme at UQ Library that has now been running for 3 years. As a result, when Annette found out she was no longer going to be able to attend today, she asked me, as someone with knowledge of the scheme having been through it to come and talk to you.

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The professional development scheme that I took part in is called LEaD which stands for Learn and Develop. It's an experiential learning program focused on leadership development that was put together by Annette and our Staff Development Consultant, Joanne Rutherford. The idea of the program was to attract talented or high potential staff, mostly new graduates but not exclusively – anyone willing and able to spend 12 months undertaking professional development activities and working on a project alongside their substantive position.

An expression of interest form went out, asking staff what they would gain from such a program and why they thought they'd be a good candidate. The idea of self-selection is essential to LEaD – it's a process that requires a high level of self-motivation to complete, so staff really need to be invested in it and to understand what they want to get out of it before being considered. Some staff were asked to apply – myself among them as though I had considered applying my contract was only a temporary one at that stage.

The guided professional development activities on the scheme are varied and I found particularly helpful: day long workshops on critical and creative thinking and problem solving, presentation skills (you can judge for yourselves how much I got out of that one), and a psychometric test: the Team Management Profile to help each individual on the team understand their working preferences and how best to communicate with others on a project. We were also each assigned a mentor from the Library's senior management team to help us reflect on our learning and assist with our project work. One of the most valuable activities for me as a young new professional was a session where senior managers were invited to share the stories of their careers. The wealth of experience across any organisation is hugely valuable as everyone brings something different to the table. And then there was a project. Each of the three teams was given a project that would be of strategic or operational benefit to the library: it wasn't about giving us busy work. In fact, the process of working on a joint project was just a means to an end, we were told that Annette was not so concerned about if the project was entirely successful or not. It was the process of getting 10 people together who didn't know each other, giving us a tricky task, being clear on the expected result, providing a few questions to get us started – and stepping back. Of course, Annette and Joanne were available if we needed help. In Annette's words: "some teams struggled for a few weeks; others learnt from their predecessors and were quick off the mark." And while we were constantly told that the process of undertaking the project was the most important aspect and the outcome didn't really matter, it very much did to us, and became a point of pride!

The first project in 2016 for example was for the first LEaD team to create 15 slides with ideas to improve our library spaces. I've brought a copy of the booklet they eventually created with me today which features over 100 ideas which were presented to the Vice-Chancellor and actually led to some of those ideas being funded and going into the new space that opened yesterday. The second team in 2017 laid the groundwork for a library wide consultation on our communications and marketing strategy, undertaking extensive research into worldwide library trends, the history of the UQ library and producing a draft communications strategy which was refined later by an external consultant.

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Which brings us to the project that I was involved in in 2018-2019.

This project came after all of that work on the communications plan which had highlighted a key disconnect in our communication with our clients. Research interviews with students, academics and professional staff across UQ showed that generally the library is thought of very well, but many projects which we had undertaken were not communicated to clients as successes, or even at all. The top criticism was that 'We love what you do but we don't know you're doing it!'. In my experience this is true of a lot of libraries – we work in what is above all a customer service environment and generally when we do things right people don't realise we've done anything at all. Unfortunately, this is also one of the biggest reasons for so many of the misconceptions about librarianship because the general public have no idea what we do. My younger brother recently got a shelving assistant job at the library at the university where he studies back in the UK, and was very disappointed to find out that he wouldn't just get to sit at the desk and read all day (and this is someone who has an older sister who has been working in libraries for more than 5 years).

One of the recommendations to come out of the communications plan was to hold 'open house' style events to which we could invite people from across the university community to show them what we do and act as a forum for better two way communication where we could also find out more about what our clients want. So that's the project that was given to my LEaD team: "Design and run a UQ Library Open House event for 2019". And that's almost all we were given aside from being told that we couldn't spend more than \$5000 and we had to hold the event in Semester 1.

The project team was made up of 9 staff with all 3 sections of the library and all three campuses represented. Over the year we all experienced a lot of change in our professional lives – 5 of us changed jobs and towards the end of the project our new university librarian commenced. Working with a team spread across 4 different locations meant we had to get good at time management and video conferencing pretty quickly – it's amazing the kinds of skills you can pick up in a short amount of time out of necessity.

One of the best things about the project was how open it was to interpretation – we had free reign! But it was also one of the hardest things about the project: trying to hone our many ideas into something workable. I'll give you a couple of examples from our initial brainstorm:

- Greenhouse in the Great Court full of orchids and you get to take one home if you come in and sign up for an ORCID
- Getting students to run the library for the day (this was very quickly rejected)
- 5-day festival with fairground rides

We quickly realised however the importance of connecting the event to the key messaging in the communications plan, and the need to focus on a specific audience to ensure a cohesive event. We settled on the University research community, as we provide so many services for them but largely market to undergraduates. Key to the success of our event was that we were able to secure the Deputy Vice Chancellor responsible for research to give a keynote address which attracted many UQ staff and research students who otherwise might not have come to the library for an event. This was not something that the library had tried to do before, and is one of the bonuses of this kind of process – we could be ambitious (perhaps overly) and because we didn't always know how things were usually done, we didn't have barriers to certain ideas that may have failed in the past.

And while it turns out professional event planning is hard (and this is coming from someone who planned a wedding in 6 weeks) one of the ways that we managed to do it so successfully and quickly was by using our connections across the organisation to get help, most of which came from people within the library who were not part of the project or senior management team, but also felt ownership of the process and believed in the idea. The result was a set of kiosks demonstrating library tools and software, helping people to sign up for research identifiers, and above all allowing staff to make connections with people outside the library which will help those researchers in the future.

The event was considered a huge success, with the Deputy Vice Chancellor thanking us for giving her the opportunity to connect with so many early career researchers and HDR students whom she might not otherwise have got to meet, and the event being used as a template for a high profile university symposium two months later.

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Apparently 'digital' was the UQ word of 2018-2019 because everything we do now is digital.

Team based on LEaD team concept: people put forward by managers for full time project but asked if they wanted to be involved. Some of those involved had either previously done lead or ended up on LEaD team (myself included)

Scary big brief – less info than lead. We have some money for some staff so you have 6 months to make something that will make the Vice Chancellor go wow.

First week was laying groundwork – setting ground rules, brainstorming. We had team mentor as opposed to individual mentors: referred to as project ‘sponsor’

Breaking the rules – too agile for agile, creative commons content

Taking opportunities – student partners, UQ2U

Setting high goals – people telling us perhaps to aim lower but we didn’t and it worked out pretty well! (Award nominated)

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So what did I take away from my LEaD and Digital Literacy taskforce experiences? And what would I like you to take away today?

I’m now a big advocate for the swiss cheese approach, and not just because it means I now get to do things like come to Canberra and buy lots of Haigh’s to take home because my bosses bosses boss knows I’m willing to try new things. I think what the swiss cheese approach is really about is taking initiative. It’s about giving people the tools and confidence to try new things, discover strengths they didn’t know they had and to help work towards a shared goal. It’s about starting where you are with what you’ve got – using limited resources to make something great. And above all it’s about people.

One of my favourite Instagram inspirational misquotes is an old one, Cicero to be exact. It goes ‘A room without books is like a body without a soul’. I think we need to update that because a library without people is soulless. People are the greatest asset we have in libraries and information professions, and people work best when we trust them to take initiative and we give ourselves clear goals. The LEaD program is a way of starting this process, but it’s something you can do every day in your work – taking opportunities when they come along to take the initiative. And above all, work on things that make you proud to do what you do.

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Thank you very much for having me here today. I’d welcome any questions that you might have.